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SUBJECT: TURKEY: MOVIE DEPICTING "REAL" ATATURK EVOKES
VISCERAL RESPONSES

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Turkey's current box-office leader "Mustafa" is stirring emotions due to its portrayal of the modern Turkish Republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk as a lonely, hard-drinking man beset by doubts. After opening to sold out shows and rave reviews, hard-line Kemalist critics launched a campaign of vicious media and Internet attacks against filmmaker Can Dunder for allegedly denigrating Turkey's founding father. Turkish democrats have raised their voices in defense of what they believe is a bold attempt by Dunder to present an intimate picture of a man whose psychological attributes remain unknown to Turks despite his physical omnipresence throughout Turkey through statues, busts and photographs. The harsh visceral reaction to "Mustafa" shows that it is still very difficult to conduct a level-headed discussion about sensitive matters of Turkish history. Still, the willingness of many to view, discuss, and even defend Dunder's film reflects Turkey's ongoing, and at times painful, modernization. End summary.

Box-office Hit "Mustafa" Shows a "Human" Ataturk

12. (U) The new movie "Mustafa" opened October 29 -- the 85th anniversary of the Turkish Republic -- to sold out theaters, standing ovations, and rave reviews but was soon attacked by Kemalists and ultranationalists. The film, which chronicles Ataturk's life from childhood to his death on November 10, 1983, presents an intimate and flawed man who writes love letters during the battle of Gallipoli, dances, drinks raki, wanders his palaces in lonely despair, and becomes more withdrawn as he ages and is beset by illness. Asked why he made the film, director Can Dunder, an esteemed "Milliyet" journalists and documentary film-maker who also made a popular 1993 documentary about Ataturk, told reporters, "I wanted to present Mustafa Kemal in a more intimate, affectionate light. All those statues, busts and flags have created a leader devoid of human qualities."

Enraged Kemalists Urge Boycott, Sue Director

13. (U) After the initial positive reception, the film came under a storm of criticism. Opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahceli claimed the movie degraded Ataturk. Israfil Kumbasar, columnist for ultranationalist

"Yeni Cag", wrote, "Ataturk raised up a people about to be erased from history, and here he is presented as a drunken debaucher. Would you accept such a portrait of Churchill?" Some critics described the movie as part of a Western-backed plot to weaken Turkey's military in favor of "enlightened Islam." Court of Appeals Chief Prosecutor Sabih Kanadoglu commented cryptically that the movie was made "upon orders" of others. "Vatan's" Yigit Bulut wrote, "the United States treated our soldiers like common criminals in Iraq. This film is part of the same strategy." Bulut urged his readers, "Do not watch this documentary, dissuade others from watching it, but above all do not allow it to plant seeds belittling Ataturk in your children's minds." Fearing a loss of customers, Turkcell, the country's main mobile phone provider, pulled out of a sponsorship deal.

¶4. (SBU) Professor Ahmet Ercan, a member of the Ataturk Thought Association and Orhan Kural, President of Turkey's Anti-Smoking Association, filed a criminal complaint November 10 (the anniversary of Ataturk's death) against Dundar. The complaint alleges that the film promotes smoking and drinking by youths by repeatedly showing Ataturk imbibing raki and chain smoking. Showing his motives go well beyond preventing smoking, Ercan told reporters that the movie deserves to be banned because it erodes the legacy of Ataturk, ridicules the Turkish nation, and promotes the division of Turkey.

¶5. (U) Bombastic emails criticizing the film have been furiously circulating the Web. In one message, Bilkent University graduate student Ates Akaydin claims, "the film denigrates Ataturk by portraying him as an atheist Communist

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and fascist dictator who promised autonomy to Kurds." Akaydin asserts that the "true dictator" is an AKP government that is accusing the Republic's defenders of trying to perpetrate a coup." Another popular email states that the movie is an attempt by "the imperial powers who have been trying to run the Middle East to transform Turkey and initiate an offensive against the Turkish military and Ataturk."

Praise for Director's Daring Approach

¶6. (U) Praising Dundar, journalist Mehmet Ali Birand wrote October 29, "Dundar has now torn down the stone statues of official ideology and shown us the human side of Ataturk, whom we had always seen as a stern, serious or even severe leader. We now see him as a man who wrote wonderful letters in French to his beloved, drank, sang, and danced with friends; a pragmatic leader who cooperated with people of opposing views. Dundar has opened the doors of an ivory cage in which we shut ourselves for 70 years." Ipek Calislar, an author acquitted for insulting Ataturk in the biography she wrote about his wife, told reporters that the harsh criticism is stifling reasoned debate and epitomizes a close-minded attitude that continues to hinder Turkey's modernization.

¶7. (C) In his November 9 "Radikal" column, retired Ankara University Professor Baskin Oran wrote that the film was the first portrayal of Ataturk as a real person, after decades of idolizing him in a religious manner, "as if he were the son of God." The criticism of Dundar, Oran stated, was backward thinking that itself harms the legacy of Ataturk. We met with Oran November 10. He told us that the ultranationalist backlash against the film is indicative of a wave of nationalism that has swept Turkey over the past several years and that has made the vote-seeking Justice and Development Party (AKP) hesitant to press ahead with an agenda of democratizing reforms.

New Generation's More Rational Reaction

18. (C) Konya's Selcuk University Professor Birol Akgun told us that he has seen no sign among his undergraduate students of the irrationalism prevalent in the wider societal debate about the movie. Although they are mostly conservative nationalists who deeply respect Ataturk, his students analyze the movie rationally and discuss its merits and shortcomings in a respectful manner. Akgun believes this new generation is more pragmatic and less idealistic than their elders, and also possessing of a greater self-confidence about Turkey's position in the world. Akgun said he is optimistic that these youths will overcome the insecurities of older generations and display more openness to discussing previously taboo topics.

Comment: Debate Shows Maturing of Turkish Society

19. (C) "Mustafa" is remarkable for being the first film that dares to deal with the personal shortcomings of Ataturk in a country where citizens are still convicted for making statements deemed to be insulting to Turkey's revered founding father, and where Ataturk's diaries and letters remain in military archives out of public view. The strong emotional reactions to the movie are an outgrowth of a larger debate over where the country is headed, as democratic reforms related to Turkey's European Union accession are forcing Turks to grapple with the meaning of secularism and nationalism. In a country where children continue to be reared in a rigid educational environment that deifies Ataturk, many Turks remain reluctant to consider the flaws and mistakes of their forefathers. But Dundar's willingness to tackle this previously taboo topic, and the debate "Mustafa" has engendered, gives evidence of a maturing Turkish society that is slowly, and at times painfully, beginning to come to terms with its history.

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